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## Zora Neale Hurston and Then Ishmael Reed: Syncretizing Moses with “Sympathetic” Comic Rhetoric<sup>1</sup>

Gillian Johns

“Now, Pheoby, don’t feel too mean wid de rest of ‘em ‘cause dey’s parched up from not knowin’ things. Dem meat-skins is *got* tuh rattle tuh make out they’s alive. Let ‘em console themselves wid talk. ‘Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else . . . It’s uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh . . . Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves.”

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Brother Levi said that this cult all started in a joke but worked on into something important. It was “dry” Pocomania when it all began. Then it got “spirit” in it and “wet.” What with the music and the barbaric rituals, I became interested and took up around the place.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (1938)

So Moses learned how God made that first day . . . [and] the company of heaven had asked to see the work of His hands and He had said, “Let there be light” and flung back the blanket from the sun and the world stood revealed.

“Then why do we have nights between days?” Moses asked.

“Well. He is still working on the world and He must hide His hand from us humans. That is why things grow at night. Most things are born in the mothering darkness . . . Darkness is the womb of creation, my boy. But the sun with his seven horns of flame is the father of life.”

Hours and hours they sat, the old hostler and the little boy behind the royal stables, in the shade of the structure. And the images arose in the brain chamber of Mentu, the stableman, and stumbled off his lips and became real creatures to Moses—to live in his memory forever.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939)

The 1970s was a good decade for African American literature. Participants in the Black Arts Movement were extraordinarily inspired by the social and performative potential of poetry and theater. And a new generation of women novelists—including Alice Walker, Gayle Jones, and Toni Morrison—began to make unforgettable names for themselves as writers and critics. In fact, Alice Walker's legwork which resulted in the essays "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" and "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," published in *Ms. Magazine* in 1974, did much to call appropriate attention to Zora Neale Hurston. But Walker's work accomplished much more; it also represented a manifesto claiming an aesthetic tradition that could serve as usable past and future for black women's writings. In *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (1991), Houston A. Baker, Jr., locates "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" as theoretically foundational to black women's poetics and reprints Walker's imagistic, soulful epiphany about her mother's garden; the image then blends, for him, into a "shimmering instant" merging the person working, art, and spirit into one "felicitous poetic image." Walker wrote: "I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty" (52). This garden in Walker's mind's eye, Baker continues, "in its shimmering irradiance of subject and object—captures [a] splendid inter-subjectivity"; and he writes: "Neither *flowers* nor *mother* is as important, finally, as an implied aboriginal creation in the *garden* . . . Walker as both reader and poet discovers through the image *garden* how the world is made anew." The discovery, then, is creativity itself or, even more, a *vernacular* garden of creativity; this, for Baker, is Walker's "enduring spiritual legacy."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, the 1970s were good for black literature. But we might now augment our image of Walker's brilliant garden as felicitous home of artistic creation and nourishing spiritual life with the recognition that a *vernacular* garden also registers—surely, at least in potential—an unruly cluster of herbs, roots, and even weeds that a priest or conjurer might use to heal (or punish?) an individual, a group, or a whole culture. In fact, Hurston was also re-discovered in this slightly different, less predictable, vein during the 1970s. Two years before the publication of "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," in which Walker provocatively (and quite angrily!) describes an imagistic double to her mother's healthy garden—i.e., Hurston's overgrown, unmarked sunken grave in Florida—Ishmael Reed names Hurston *first* in the front matter of his 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, as an authority on New World, syncretic sacred invention. He writes: "Some *unknown natural phenomenon* occurs which cannot be explained, and a new local demi-god is named," and he attributes this insight regarding such lowbrow "jes' grew" phenomena to Hurston. He also lists her books *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Voodoo Gods (Tell My Horse)* (1938)—which of course broke ground in the study of African-derived or -centered conjure, hoodoo, and Vodun in the American South, Haiti, and Jamaica—in his "great books" bibliography of 104 volumes included at the end of the novel. But equally important, Reed re-writes as the final, revelatory scene to *Mumbo Jumbo* a 25-page, bolder comic version of the tale at the center of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), which features this biblical hero as syncretized New World hoodoo man and Haitian deity Damballah from Dahomey.

Why underscore this convergence of sacred and secular recoveries? I often tell my students that, as much as I admire black writers like Ellison, Morrison and Reed, it is Hurston who taught me *how* to read: that, to really read some African American writers you

have to do a lot of work—and often outside the text proper (or, say, with paratextual enthusiasm!). As my first epigraph highlights, Hurston’s Janie Woods states at the end of *Their Eyes*: “You got to *go* there to *know* there” (183; italics original) with comparatively less emphasis on the (implicitly) interchangeable location “there” than on the actions and results of *going* and *knowing*. And Hurston’s books all present apt models for writers and readers with their promises of cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic gifts if we would only *go*. So when Walker makes the physical effort to get to Hurston’s street, neighbors, and grave, she and we are rewarded with the restoration of generations of usable women-centered sacred knowledge and lived practice. And when Reed does the ideal or *implied reader’s* work to follow Hurston’s text, and to re-interpret its ambiguous, ironized frames by way of his own research—reading, that is, not only Hurston’s books but some of the books she read, as well as related others she did not have access to—and then generously presents to the future record his own reading list, again we profit cognitively and iconographically in exposure to these ritual inter-texts. Indeed, when *Tell My Horse* was re-published in 1990 for a new generation of readers, Reed was on the scene to write the foreword that would bring his active engagement with Hurston’s ethnographic recovery of Africanist spiritual practice and belief full circle.

But if we don’t *go*, Hurston also aptly demonstrated in all of her works, we will not see much at all.<sup>3</sup> In Hurston there are always at least two—and sometimes contradictory or conflicting—levels of meaning, as scholars began to note quickly after their first reads of *Their Eyes* during its 1970s recovery<sup>4</sup>; she mastered the art and rhetoric of oblique pointing toward (or, better, around) her subject, which she called “feather-bed resistance” in *Mules and Men* (1935).<sup>5</sup> To return, then, to Reed’s insights in his forward to *Tell My Horse*, he underscores here not only the significant fact that it took “the restless intellect of Zora Neale Hurston to make Neo-African religion, and its gods, more than ‘naught’” (xi) but also that she was remarkably brave and rhetorically sophisticated to grapple with her taboo subject in circuitous (and humorous!) language while she also took care to maintain the philosophical balance that the dual lines of Petro and Rada loas demand of devotees. Of course Hurston is not alone, or even first, in extraordinary rhetorical indirection; to paraphrase one scholar’s way of making the point, much of black American writing, before the Civil Rights Movement, was expressly packaged for misreading.<sup>6</sup> So a *good reader’s* conceptual work is mandated, and while most scholars examining the novels by Hurston and Reed focus on the important political implications of their re-imaginings of the Judeo-Christian biblical story, here I want to centralize the process of reading—including many readers’ vulnerabilities to the Exodus story—as well as highlight the felicity of the veil of humor and comedy for presenting skeptical re-writings of Mosaic iconography: what I am calling “sympathetic” comic rhetoric.<sup>7</sup> But I should confess that what is especially intriguing to me about this creative pairing is that we are just now catching up to Reed’s reading of Hurston’s *Moses* as *critique* of the conceptual laziness that the figure seems to invite into would-be followers’ imaginations. Indeed, a good forty years in a wilderness of interpretation *after* Reed’s 1972 novel appeared and announced his affinity with Hurston’s work, and we are only just now seeing the comic and intertextual relations between their twin cautionary tales about the dangers of awe in the face of charismatic spiritual and political leadership.<sup>8</sup>

# # #

I want to claim, then, that our failure to register the tendentious critiques that both Hurston and Reed make of Moses and monotheism mark egregious under-readings of their co-signifying, and I will look here at a few of Hurston's rhetorical feats that humorously draw attention to ways we might *want* to read her Moses and then briefly at Reed's clarifying gloss. But first, so that we can identify what is at stake—and also potentially exciting—in interpreting these writers' imaginative meditations *through* one another, I want to revisit some of the relevant reception history of Hurston's third novel. More or less neglected upon publication at the end of Hurston's most productive decade, *Moses* has not gained the close interpretation warranted by her claim that it was the book in which she strove for her "ideal" and biographer Robert Hemenway noted early on during the Hurston recovery that this ambitious novel's failure to "achieve its own aspirations" is "no excuse for its critical neglect."<sup>9</sup> Writers' careers are of course often punctuated by uneven creative results, but reader responses to *Moses* indicate that it is confusion about Hurston's rhetorical strategy that stunts interpretation. Consider, for example, that the headnote describing Hurston's literary work in the canon-defining *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) contemplates *Moses* thus:

Most critics are perplexed by the book . . . Fascinating though this retelling of the Exodus story undoubtedly is, the transmuting of Israelites into African Americans and of Moses into a practitioner of hoodoo leaves many readers wondering whether Hurston was more interested in modernizing the biblical tale or parodying it. Nevertheless, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* . . . has proved attractive enough to have remained in print.<sup>10</sup>

*Moses* remains in print, but only barely, because Hurston's thematic interests in the novel are unclear: that is, whether she seeks to modernize or parody a sacred tale; and of course the implication here is that to parody the Exodus story would be inappropriate.<sup>11</sup>

Quite intriguingly, Hurston's story does recount the Exodus narrative of the birth, rise, and exile of Moses; his apprenticeship with Jethro in Midian and calling to service by the voice in a burning bush on Mount Sinai; his subsequent return to Egypt, verbal braggadocio and confrontations with Pharaoh, and calling of miraculous violent plagues upon the Egyptians; and finally his leadership of the Hebrews when they leave Egypt and subsist in the wilderness for forty years. All in all, the broad action is quite close to the biblical tale; so there must be something about Hurston's *rhetoric strategy*—or, after Seymour Chatman, the novel's *discourse*<sup>12</sup>—that bothers many readers. Consider further the foreword to the 1991 re-edition of *Moses*, in which editor Deborah McDowell identifies what she sees as the primary source of the failure of this, for her, "badly flawed" novel: specifically its "satiric mode." She writes:

Satire, which literally means "a dish filled with mixed fruits," envelops and defines *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, a mode appropriate to a novel which insists that the fruits of everyone's loins are "mixed." The reader is occasionally bewildered and frustrated by this mix in that every attempt to penetrate to some essential, extractable political position or source is concealed behind the mélange of humor,

conjure stories, folktales, and braided historical narratives, and is ultimately thwarted.<sup>13</sup>

This sense of *Moses* as radically equivocal has been reiterated by earlier and later, more recovery-oriented scholars who have found the novel's humor—its incongruities between (comical) language and (sacred) subject matter or sentiment<sup>14</sup>—to trouble interpretation of the implied author's messages. And we might venture further, with modal or generic tendencies in mind, that—especially if we see satire as a “rationalist discourse” that attacks “folly and vice” and, in their place, offers “norms of good behavior and right thinking”<sup>15</sup>—readers will legitimately seek an ultimately univocal (or monoglossic) rational and moral message in *Moses*. Or again, as I suggest above, if satire tends to level pious and spiritual matters, it might simply be inappropriate to the sacred subject here.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is perhaps precisely this pre-textual or ideological problem of felicitous fit between theme and mode that led Daryl Dickson-Carr, in his exhaustive critical anatomy of African American satirical narrative, to remark: “I cannot comfortably claim that Hurston's [third] novel should be read primarily as a satire.”<sup>17</sup>

Scholars have rightly pointed out, then, that the foundationally rationalist and moralist discourse we expect in satire does not seem to constitute a viable modal ground facilitating interpretation of Hurston's humorous, dialogic fictional world of a traditionally religious figure and story. But it should surely by now surprise us that Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s landmark theory of “signifying”—which identified important rhetorical innovations, such as the oral illusion of free indirect discourse, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—has not been maximally developed as a model for “decoding” more of the complex and/or oblique innovations Hurston produced. Hence we might say that—for lack of a more tactful expression—our *under-utilization* of an *already available* vernacular theory has delayed appreciation of Hurston's (admittedly still impious, but also) extraordinarily provocative historical insights about the Exodus story and the figure of Moses. In fact, for Gates and other “signifying” and vernacular theorists, a culturally proficient interlocutor must always consider the paratextual and multi-contextual realm (or conceptual spread) in which a signifying speech act occurs. In a rare moment linking signifying explicitly to humor and marking it as “the Other of discourse,” Gates even writes, and I quote at length to capture his articulation of the multivalent “chaos” of such utterances:

Signifyin(g) concerns itself with . . . the chaos of what Saussure calls “associative relations,” which we can represent as the playful puns on a word that occupy the paradigmatic axis of language and which a speaker draws on for figurative substitutions. *These substitutions in Signifyin(g) tend to be humorous, or function to name a person or a situation in a telling manner.* Whereas signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations . . . Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations. Jacques Lacan calls these vertically suspended associations “a whole articulation of relevant contexts,” by which he means all of the associations that a signifier carries from other contexts, which must be deleted, ignored, or censored “for this signifier to be lined up with a signified to produce a specific meaning.” Everything that must be excluded for meaning to remain coherent and linear comes to bear in the process of Signifyin(g). (Gates 49-50; emphasis added)

Gates indicates that signifying constitutes, at the very level of conception, what we must *anticipate* as the kind of discursive “noise” that will interfere with implied, good readers’ impulses to establish any monologic or monolithic meaning or commentary.

But also note Gates’ claim here that the “free play” of aggressive signifying ideas, associations, and “relevant contexts” functions especially aptly in the rhetorical arena of humor, pun, and comedy. Indeed, Candace Lang, Gates’ theoretical contemporary during the late 1980s, describes the rhetoric of humor in similar theoretical terms, and I quote at length again to capture her clarifying sense of such writers’ celebration—rather than discomfort—in the face of the aggressively non-mimetic ambiguity and polysemy found in humor (again, I would add signifying):

It is those authors who do not subscribe to the essentially Platonic notion of language as a mere representation of ideas, or of writing as a necessary but potentially dangerous supplement to conceptualization, and who work out the consequences of their antimetaphysical presuppositions in their texts, whom I call “humorists.” The humorist writes with the conviction that language is *always* an essential determinant of thought (not only accidentally or when used perversely), and that its semantic ambiguities and connotative resonances are to be explored and actualized rather than limited or suppressed . . . . If the fundamental problem raised (implicitly or explicitly) by the ironic work is the expression of meaning, it is for the humorous text the production of meaning. The humorous text, then, does not express meaning in the traditional, etymological sense of exteriorizing what was interior to the authorial psyche . . . ; [rather] it organizes a number of linguistic elements into systems offering a variety of potential meanings to be actualized by the reader.<sup>18</sup>

For Lang, the humorist never strives for univocal meaning; in fact he or she sees—and, what’s more, expects—possibility and productivity, rather than perversion, in a “chaotic” play of ideas through experimental, potential “expression.” Further, the “humorist critic” or *reader* interprets along similar lines; Lang writes: “The humorist critic focuses on the functioning of the text . . . at the level of the signifier, rather than seeking to somehow ‘see through’ the language to its referent or authorial source.”

I would suggest, then, that if we do not link cognitive (and perhaps satirical) critique—in the pen of a Hurston or Reed—to the radical free-play of humor, we will fail to recognize the demanding ambiguity that signifying as vernacular rhetorical practice presents. On the other hand, if we do accept both unruly critique and humor as central to such authors’ signifying practices, we will carefully attend to omissions, incongruities, and contradictions of pattern and expectation in their writings. If, that is, African American vernacular writing, as Gates asserts, is fundamentally marked by “double-voiced” formal “repetition and difference,”<sup>19</sup> this insight invites an approach to Hurston’s strange, new rhetorical approach to *Moses* as the culturally literate, *felicitous* use of humor to fashion an *oblique* tendentious glance at an implicitly sacred icon. But this also means that her work may not privilege the viewpoint of a literate narratee (or intended reader) whose correct approaches—or “moves,” if you will—have already been delineated in Western cultures of writing. Gates in fact suggests that signifying denotes a meta-methodology that would and

will take on infinitely divergent formal practices in different vernacular-based mediums. “When playing the blues,” he writes, for example:

[A] great musician often tries to make musical phrases that are elastic in their formal properties. These elastic phrases stretch the form rather than articulate the form. Because the form is self-evident to the musician, both he and his well-trained audience are playing and listening with expectation. Signifyin(g) disappoints these expectations . . . [which] creates a dialogue between what the listener expects and what the artist plays. Whereas younger, less mature musicians accentuate the beat, more accomplished musicians . . . feel free to imply it.<sup>20</sup>

For Gates, signifying comes to life—in both artist and audience—with mastery of form to the degree that an original artistic pattern may be only implied. And Hurston may not have had a ready-made sophisticated readership in her day, but she knew more than most about the potential felicity of signifying as the aesthetics of play upon known patterns.<sup>21</sup>

So, for those not familiar with the “hall of mirrors”<sup>22</sup> that signifying can be, let me disclose my backstage thinking about Hurston’s acumen. I am certain that an anthropologist such as Hurston, well-educated in the Western liberal arts, knows that black speech and representation are still during the 1930s blighted by their default reception through the comic mode (or, say, after James Weldon Johnson, the “two full stops” of “humor and pathos”<sup>23</sup>), wedded to them through antebellum minstrel performance. She knows, moreover, that conceptualizations and representations received as African American in the republic of letters will not be expected to be competitively dignified and whole or philosophically sound. If such an artist, then, should plan an ambitious novel of ideas that would constitute an impious critique of a cultural figure sacred to all of her potential reading constituencies—albeit for different reasons—how might she proceed? Would the romantic or tragic mode work; or might the tale be felicitously *submerged* in the very comic mode that would denigrate black culture, so that the always already multiple strains of readers it faces can find a viable track of the “double-voiced” tale to fit their tastes? Moreover, if the comic is used “sympathetically,” might the critique—if indeed it is registered by readers—potentially “cure” an infelicitous, reductive rhetorical situation with the hair of the comic dog that ails African American expression and then spark conceptual advance for some readers? As Hurston herself writes in *Tell My Horse* (see my second epigraph above), might the tale begin “in a joke” but then be “worked on into something important”?

# # #

At a common sense level, we might think of magic or conjure as esoteric practices involving transformation of the material world, but Theophus Smith argues in his study *Conjuring Culture* that we more appropriately should “regard magic as a primordial and enduring system of communication—or as a form of ‘language’”—and thus its twin signifying system, conjure, as “a magical means of transforming ‘reality’ through ‘ritual speech’ or a system . . . for mapping and managing the world in the form of signs.” Smith, moreover, sees African American conjure as a “pharmacopeic tradition rather like homeopathy in that it involves “first discerning, and then performing an operation based on, the imputed affinity that one thing has for another . . . [in] appearance, function, prior experience of contact, or in some



other way”; thus he writes that conjure exploits “phenomena in which ‘like’ affects ‘like’—in which a substance similar to another can affect that other for good or ill.”<sup>24</sup> Following Smith, conjure in the discourse-based vernacular worlds of literature and language itself might surely—if indeed counterintuitively—take the form of a competitive system of linguistic signs and sounds in which healing (or, say, correction or transformed knowledge) is effected by the principle that “like” discourse *sympathetically* “affects like” discourse. This formulation, I believe, further clarifies Hurston’s ambiguous, comic representational choices in *Moses*—and, then, Reed’s less ambiguous, but no less comic, reiteration of her example. She might, that is, have produced stably focalized “positive” and powerful heroic racial images that would replace historically “negative” ones—and yet then, of course, be vulnerable to commodification or new, externally derived forms of comedy. Instead, she repeatedly stages (and ironizes!) the rhetorical and cognitive dynamics of competition for authority among a series (i.e., Miriam, Mentu, Jethro, Moses, and Aaron) of similarly (sympathetically) comic, vernacular-speaking “big talkers” who expertly marshal discourse to gain (and sometimes undermine) power and effect before readers’ “eyes.”<sup>25</sup>

Though she takes license in rendering character and agency, then, Hurston’s plot, as I note above, remains close to the biblical story of the Exodus, so that readers might assume her intent is to reproduce its celebration of the historical turn to monotheism, but from the outset *Moses* undermines the cognitive stability of anything monologic with its repeated discursive attention to the central role that perspective plays in the production of verbal and imagistic meaning. As early as the “Author’s Introduction” framing the novel, Hurston highlights an arguably light, but notable, contradiction in the manner in which she focalizes characterization of Moses. She writes in the first sentence: “Moses was an old man with a beard. He was the great law-giver. He had some trouble with Pharaoh about some plagues and led the Children of Israel out of Egypt and on to the Promised Land . . . That is the common concept of Moses in the Christian world.” Hurston then—and quite abruptly—shifts iconic registers and thereby invites an increasing sense of awe but also the nagging, competing sense of incongruity that we find with humor:

But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world . . . [and] Africa has her mouth on Moses. All across the continent there are legends of the greatness of Moses, but not because of his beard nor because he brought the laws down from Sinai . . . What other man has ever seen with his eyes even the back part of God’s glory? Who else has ever commanded the wind and the hail? The light and darkness? That calls for power, and that is what Africa sees in Moses to worship . . .

In Haiti, the highest god in the Haitian pantheon is Damballah Ouedo Ouedo Freda Dahomey and he is identified as Moses, the serpent god. But this deity did not originate in Haiti. His home is in Dahomey and is worshipped there extensively. Moses had his rod of power, which was a living serpent. So that in every temple of Damballah there is a living snake, or the symbol.

And this worship of Moses as the greatest one of magic is not confined to Africa. Wherever the children of Africa have been scattered by slavery, there is the acceptance of Moses as the fountain of mystic powers . . . (*Moses* xxiii-xxiv)

I reproduce Hurston’s framing statement here for readers to experience the pleasurable crescendo of the verbal portrait she paints of a diasporic Africanist god worthy of worship and respect—and perhaps capable of redeeming the dignity and spiritual integrity of black

culture. But also registering strongly in this introduction are sentences that cumulatively mark the interfering “noise” of fundamentally incongruous perspectives toward the figure of Moses or the beginnings of a radically unstable representation.

If Hurston’s novel henceforth consistently drew the portrait of a mystical, larger-than-life Mosaic heroic, we might take her at her implicit word in the introduction that the thematic contribution of her *Moses* is primarily to dramatize or even foster a cultural or racial nationalism that celebrates and records essentialized black, African power. But at pivotal moments in the tale we are (again, incongruously) returned to the spirit of the first sentence—“Moses was an old man with a beard”—that is, a benignly mundane, non-charismatic and grandfatherly version of the biblical figure. Indeed, when Moses leaves his home in Egypt as a young man, after killing an overseer, Hurston writes:

He had crossed over, so he sat down on a rock near the seashore to rest himself. He had crossed over so he was not of the house of Pharaoh. He did not own a palace because he had crossed over. He did not have an Ethiopian Princess for a wife. He had crossed over. He did not have friends to sustain him. He had crossed over. He did not have enemies to strain against his strength and power. He had crossed over. He was subject to no law except the laws of tooth and talon. He had crossed over. The sun who was his friend and ancestor in Egypt was arrogant and bitter in Asia. He had crossed over. He felt as empty as a post hole for he was none of the things he once had been. He was a man sitting on a rock. He had crossed over. (*Moses* 78)

Several critics have read this passage as a signal moment in which, by freeing him of all worldly trappings, Hurston prepares her young Moses to become a spiritual leader,<sup>26</sup> but with slight perspectival shift one can as readily argue that we meet here an empty (or, better, emptying) signifier—indeed, finally *comically characterized* as “empty as a post hole” until someone fills it. In other words, given Hurston’s repeated juxtapositions of the minimally “imagistic” phrase “crossed over” alongside subtracted associations from Moses, his name now designates a radical lack of identity or content unless *we or someone acting like a narrator* would supply it. Yet there are many such rhetorical moments in *Moses* which appear to “talk down” the awesome figure that no one but Hurston has promised to “talk up.” And because of their repetition, rather than labeling these passages flaws I suggest we follow the example of Reed to identify them as invitations to would-be *implied readers* of a *signifying novel* to register squarely the disruption of expectation—or, more clearly, the aggressive corruption of an orthodox story. What’s more, it follows that the indirect edge of the signifying here has a little fun at the expense of uninitiated *historical readers* who would rely for orientation on an internal crutch of partial, biased perspective—or even wishful, magical thinking—in the imaginative construction of this figure who could still, for them, represent charismatic power and leadership.

Consider that Miriam, having been assigned to watch the basket in which her baby brother Moses lay in the Nile, comes home to tell her family and the other Hebrews that her brother has been adopted by the Egyptian princess and taken to the palace, and this is the foundation of the biography of the divinely appointed Moses. But readers will remember a few pages before, when Hurston recounted that during the long watch the young girl’s “eyes wandered from the particular spot among the bulrushes to bulrushes in general,” and then she fell asleep. She wakes to see the Princess washing in the river, preparing to depart

and then stopping, and in third person limited point of view, Hurston focalizes the iconic scene via Miriam's now-unreliable eyes, writing:

... [T]he party did not move off at once. Something in the water had attracted the attention of the Princess. She was directing someone in the party to it. One of the girls removed her sandals and went down into the stream and came out with a dark, oval object. "Aha!" thought Miriam, "They had forgotten the casket in which is kept the things for washing the Princess. They will get a good scolding for that. But I wish they had left it so I could have seen what was in it. (28)

Some time ago, critic Barbara Johnson aptly noted that in this passage "Hurston has here calculated a maximum of narrative ambiguity" with the "floating signifier" of the "dark, oval object" in the river whose contents—baby Moses, "things for washing," something else?—readers cannot know for sure.<sup>27</sup> Further, rather than highlighting a sacralizing biography of an awesome and authoritative future leader to follow, Hurston lets Miriam's richly elaborated fantasies about royalty, luxury, and beauty dominate her account to listeners *within* the world of the novel. And yet we readers are thus invited to re-consider the man- or self-making process involved in establishing narrative authority and meaning rather than divine intention or intervention. Indeed, we surely must become skeptical readers of Hurston's represented "gods" in the world of *Moses* when, only a couple of chapters after Miriam's watch, one of Egypt's priests admits cynically, after "set[ting] magic tricks to awe and frighten" the young Moses as a means of discouraging him from "stealing into" the "forbidden precincts behind the temples" to learn priestly secrets: "[T]he contributions at the altars are getting thin. Let us make a new sun-god to renew the devotions of the people. I have just invented a new incense that shall be known as his breath and indication of his presence at the altar" (44).

Again, in Chapter 17, Moses is called on Mount Sinai to return to Egypt by an unknown "great voice" that speaks from a burning bush and gives him a rod that can turn into a writhing snake. Hurston recounts, this time from Moses' own viewpoint:

Moses rounded a large boulder in sight of the spot where he was going and went on easily. There was the bush, and there was the rock under it. He was within a few feet of it when the bush burst into furious flame. Moses could not believe his eyes, but neither could he shut them on the sight. Because the bush was burning brightly but its leaves did not twist and crumple in the heat . . . It just burned, and Moses, awed though he was, could no more help coming closer to try and see the why of the burning bush than he could quit growing old. Both things were bound up in his birth. Moses drew near the bush.

"Moses," spoke a great voice which Moses did not know, "take off your shoes."

"How come, Lord? I know no voice like that can't be like mine."

"This ground you are walking on is holy ground. Take off those shoes."

"Yes, sir, Lord." Moses loosened his shoes and took them off without once taking his eyes off of the burning bush that did not wither. Moses stood barefooted and bareheaded and trembled with awe. (125-126)

This moment appears to derive straight from the Bible. And yet good readers will recall at least two passages preceding the scene in which Hurston undermines certainty that Moses' calling to service stems, without interference, from the divine. First, in Chapter 15 the narrator focuses closely on the figure of Jethro, Moses' mentor and father-in-law, notably beyond the extent of his role (or viewpoint) in the biblical story, and she presents him as a master in magic, privileging both *his skill and his will* over Moses'; she writes:

Long years had passed since [Moses] embraced the religion of Jethro. He had learned to build the altars of uncut stone or earth and make the offerings, and the tribesmen had come to accept him . . . as a priest. He practically lived on the mountain, in the desert, beside streams, feeding his mind on Nature. Sometimes he would be absent for days and sometimes weeks in seeking answers to questions that Nature put to him. *Jethro now sat at his feet in all things except one.* Jethro was still his master in magic but Moses steadily closed the gap between them and that delighted old Jethro more than his grandsons. (111; emphasis added)

Despite the ambiguity Hurston registers near the end of this passage (that Moses's skill in magic continues to improve such that he will likely one day surpass his mentor Jethro), we take in the problem (of narrative authority or reliability) that Jethro's agency, along with his will, at *this* plotted point, introduce—that he has one significant skill greater than Moses': magic. And in the final paragraphs of Chapter 16, directly before the awesome scene in which Moses is literally "called" to service, Hurston comically raises doubt about the holiness of this calling and again finally privileges Jethro's will over that of either Moses or God. After many years, Moses here has flatly refused the repeated requests—or, in Hurston's vernacular lexicon, "crowding"—of his wife Zipporah and Jethro to return to Egypt to lead the Hebrews, but their self-interested desires to manipulate him gain the last, memorably comic, word. Hurston writes here:

"Just a fine King going to waste," Zipporah said bitterly. "Look at the shape the man's got on him! Portly and strong and everything. He sure would look noble in a crown. So far as the Queen is concerned, I would do just as well as the next one with the right clothes on. It's a shame that Moses is that stubborn."

"Well, he might think I'm through with the thing, but first and last he's going to find out different. I ain't been to Koptos, it is true, and had no fight with no never-dying snake, *but maybe there is still something about snakes that he can learn. The backside of that mountain may get too hot to hold him yet.*"

(123-124; emphasis added)

Surely we cannot discount the "relevant context" (to recall Gates' phrase) that Jethro's voice and claims represent at this pivotal moment in Hurston's novel—i.e. his poignant, if oblique and signifying, insinuations that he might know (one, magical thing?) more "about snakes" than Moses and that the "mountain may get too hot." Moses, on the very next page, will confront a burning hot bush on Mount Sinai and be gifted with a snake that turns into a wooden rod when he picks it up. And these are the only two "miracles" that lead (or awe!) him into accepting the leadership position.

There are additional scenes in Hurston's novel that offer readers a "calculation" of "maximum ambiguity," to use Johnson's phrasing again, but near the end of *Moses*, Hurston writes one of her most compelling (and comical) scenes highlighting the vulnerability of partial, self-interested perspective regarding awesome, powerful, and "divine" focalization. When a wary Moses, "hearing the mad clamor" of the mob of fearful and disgruntled Hebrews who "circled" him, "snarling like animals," Hurston writes in shifting viewpoints (i.e., from his to theirs):

*... But in spite of it all he was cool enough to note the shuffle of the grass in the wind and the little dance of dust in a whirlwind. He realized that he was in great danger of being taken for a mere man where he stood. While in the Tabernacle of the Congregation they could scarcely think of him apart from the mysteries. So he turned suddenly and walked in that direction, wondering if he would live long enough to make it...*

*He invited the Princes and the Elders to enter and told the people to wait outside. He entered last and faced the angry Princes and Elders for a full minute in silence then fell on his face in the door.*

A great gasp went up from the Princes and the people outside crowded back from the door in some nameless fear. The figure of Moses on the ground did not look helpless somehow. It inspired more terror than it would have even with the uplifted hand. Everybody shrunk away as far as they could. (257-258; emphasis added)

Moses here—reminding me, as a reader, of the all-too-human "old man with a beard" we began the novel with—does no more than enter the Tabernacle and fall down in the doorway (notably, at its threshold where a trickster might be found), and yet the Hebrews who watch him are terrified; *to them*, Hurston indicates, "The figure of Moses on the ground did not look helpless somehow. It inspired more terror than it would have even with the uplifted hand." Crucially, then, if we read from the viewpoint of Hurston's "Hebrews" here who have already been primed for pyrotechnic spectacle, we might not notice a comical diminution or "talking down" of Moses' divine attributes. But if, via focalization, we are placed in a position structurally kin to Moses' followers, we are also *readers* outside their fictionalized circle who have the option of marshalling additional "relevant contexts" during the meaning making process.

By rhetorical sleight of hand, that is, it seems that over the course of this complex narrative Hurston has equated many of her readers with naïve "Hebrews" that Moses leads out of Egypt and enthralls with gratuitous displays of magical powers (which she attributes to Africa!). To be sure, the argument I am making seems counterintuitive in that it rests on an uneasy relationship between Hurston and her anticipated historical readers when she is at her most humorous—and most serious, apparently, given the dread stakes of a sacred trickster's actual "play." And yet, it makes a kind of sense to keep comical and obscure an impious critique of many of her own contemporaries' desires for and faith in charismatic (and of course phallogocentric) leaders who will lift them miraculously out of their racialized political and iconic "wilderness." But rather than taking the place of these—to Hurston—naïve *viewers*, solely reliant on the immediate image offered in any given scene, readers have access to additional skills, insights, and multiple viewpoints for interpreting the tricky discursive shape-shifting we are faced with here.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, by highlighting these comical

(and ironizing) scenes, I have been suggesting—rather tendentiously myself—that if we readers are awe-struck like Hurston’s “Hebrews,” and sometimes even Moses (recall his calling!), it is perhaps because we are already (or desire to be?) believers in powers greater than our labors of discernment. In his last words to Joshua before disappearing to Mount Nebo to retire—or “end up in mystery as he had come,” Hurston writes (286)—Moses himself points to the ardent necessity of what he calls, quite simply, “interpretation” when distinguishing the awesome divine from the mundane or worldly; he states:

And don’t let the people take up too many habits from the nations they come in contact with and throw away what they got from God. They are blessed. Nobody else ever got a straight talk from God like we have. Don’t let ’em throw it away. You know, Joshua, it ain’t everybody who can go right up and talk with God. And, then, too, it’s less than that who can talk with God and then bring back the right word from the talk. It is so easy to mix up what you are wishing with what God is saying. *You might not get another good interpreter.* (279; emphasis added)

Notably repeating the word “talk” here four times, Moses points to the ease with which wishful thinking can distort interpretation of God’s linguistic messages. Thus Hurston’s play between the awe we might bring to divine language-based mystery and the skills of interpretation in fact required constitutes a pedagogy of savvy critical reading.

In sum, in Hurston’s signifying “hall of mirrors” we progressively become either greenhorn dupes or competent implied readers prepared to make our way toward sound interpretation, and Ishmael Reed is the first reader of this second type on record who follows her lead to syncretically re-interpret, -identify, and -articulate an available array of (African-descended) cultural forms and figures in writing. What’s more, it would seem that, regardless of whether Moses has been iconic in the historical African American imagination, in these writers’ cosmic fictional worlds it make no pragmatic sense to follow a single, essentialized “god,” if only because it puts one in an unnecessarily vulnerable position. The insight their works share, then, is that the meaning of any verbal utterance or name has the potential for at least doubling when we introduce human viewpoint. And if, for Hurston, shifting perspective is thus essential in interpretation, for Reed, the technical term “aspect” precisely captures the dynamic nature of identity and iconic relevance. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, Reed takes up the pairing that Hurston delineates initially in *Tell My Horse*—that voodoo loas (or divine actors) can manifest in (at least!) two aspects or classes: the slower, cool, and benign Rada; and the hotter Petro, which are much more dangerous and often violent. Hurston wrote:

Before we go into the description of the outdoor altar to Petro, let me give you some idea of the differences between a Rada god and a Petro divinity.

As has been said before, Damballa and his suite are high and pure. They do only good things for people, but they are slow and lacking in power. The Petro gods on the other hand are terrible and wicked, but they are more powerful and quick. They can be made to do good things, however, as well as evil. They give big doses of medicine and effect quick cures. So these petro gods are resorted to by a vast number of people who wish to gain something but fear them at the same time. The Rada spirits demand nothing more than chickens and pigeons, and there are no

consequences for hereafter to what they do for you, while the Petros demand hogs, goats, sheep, cows, dogs and in some instances they have been known to take dead bodies from the tombs. (164, 167)

Reed reiterates this explanation in his foreword to *Tell My Horse*,<sup>29</sup> and he also presents a series of figures throughout *Mumbo Jumbo* associated with the “left hand” Petro practice, including Earline/Erzulie, Faust, and of course Moses and his associate historical actors the Knights Templar [whose sign is nicely two knights (both aspects) riding on one horse (host)]. But what is especially striking here is that, if in reading Hurston we would gather the notion that all loas (like Damballa above) are essentially stable or confined to their identities or particular paths, Reed makes it crystal clear that the series of loas that act in his fictional world could just as easily have been met in their Rada aspects, so it is *always* up to readers to decipher their respective signs and actions or effects.

Space prevents an exhaustive reading of Reed’s also complex novel, but in any case my primary intent with this essay has been to explore Hurston’s still under-read signifying in *Moses* and to underscore Reed’s contribution to the black literary tradition as an early felicitous *reader* of her most controversial Africanist work. Hence we should note that Reed’s unruly sympathetic gloss on *Moses* reiterates the spirit of Hurston’s comical critique of the cognitive magic of monotheism but also clarifies and expands its scope. As I noted above, good readers must work to identify esoteric references in Reed’s novel from paratextual or outside “relevant context.”<sup>30</sup> For example, we are not instructed, within the novel, to associate the character PaPa Labas—who will turn out to reveal some important spiritual and historical insights but also to lack some others—with the African trickster Legba. And yet at the level of plot *Mumbo Jumbo* features a much more accessibly rendered centuries-old spiritual battle between Atonists and Jes Grew carriers (or JGCs): the first a group of bullying, violently oppressive proponents of all things disembodied, monologic, and monolithic; the second a disorganized, but repeating, global phenomena of artists, dancers, and multicultural proponents of all forms of life-giving connection and creativity. And a reader not ideologically wedded to the hierarchies or binary logic of Judeo-Christian or Western thought more broadly might experience the epiphany that an Africanist—or black American, “Jes Grew,” beginning with the comic minstrel Topsy!—world view offers a rich network of multivalent “fits for your head” (24) rather than the stale, narrow spirit of one size fits all.

The great (and yet cosmically serious) joke here, then, is that we do not have to agonize over interpreting Reed’s charismatic Moses—i.e., is he an African god or a jive-talking hustler?—because in Reed’s hands he is clearly one of Western history’s greatest Atonists, an ambitious adept at manipulation, charlatanry, and fear-inducing violence. Refusing mystery or awe, Reed writes glibly of this father of monotheism: “Moses is the adopted son of ‘the stubborn, self-indulgent daughter of a weak Pharaoh,’ who tries to destroy the agrarian, pagan Osiris cult” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 175). Later, after he has gained all he can from Jethro and plans to find the Book of Thoth in order to increase his power, Reed writes, again with great good humor and quotidian speech that I quote at some length:

Moses seemed like he was trying to tiptoe away when Jethro stopped him because by now Jethro knew that he was being used.

Where are you going, son? Koptos?

The men ceased playing their instruments . . . .

. . . . If you get it out of her [Isis] it will be useless to you; only a few things about converting rods to snakes; simple *bokor* tricks, the rest will be so awful that you will wish you had never known The Work. Son, she's in that Aspect of herself with this Moon and you won't be able to receive the better side of her Book . . .

Look, leave me alone. Silly old man out here in the backwoods. How dare you talk to me that way. I'm a Pharaoh, or soon will be 1.

Moses jumped on his horse as tears came to Jethro's eyes. As he was about to ride away Moses rode to Jethro's porch where all the men were assembled and he dropped "a couple of bucks" on old Jethro.

Here's the copyright fee for the junk you taught me, he said sarcastically.

Jethro took the dollars and flung them at Moses who rode off into the night.

He wouldn't listen and . . . will be merely a 2-bit sorcerer [of] the Left Hand.

(*Mumbo Jumbo* 179)

Reed here reiterates and builds on Hurston's initial amplification of Jethro's role in the Exodus story; and Jethro's prediction will turn out to be correct that Moses will gain only fake "*bokor* tricks"—instead of authentic, useful power—from his contact with Isis (equated here with the Book of Thoth) due to the Petro "aspect" in which he will find her.

And yet readers will register Moses' disturbing casual arrogance and disrespect in the sacred presence of gifts of actual spiritual power; Reed writes:

. . . . Moses was directed by a traveler to the Temple of Osiris and Isis. He walked until he came upon the temple outside town. He entered between 2 of its 6 columns . . . . Moses went into the kitchen and munched on some cereal that had been left in some ritual bowls. He drank some wine; he went past the dining room and into the bedroom of mysteries which was covered with pictures of male and female genitalia. Fatigued from traveling, Moses lay down on the bed and went immediately to sleep. At about 2 A.M. he awoke to someone running her hands through his hair and kissing him. It was Isis in the Petro aspect of herself. She was dressed in a scarlet see-through gauzy gown and covered with the odor of a strange perfume. He had never smelt anything so intoxicating to the brain. Her hair was giant black-bird features, her eyes blazing. (*Mumbo Jumbo* 180)

Despite his admission that he "would have to be careful" with Isis, Moses in fact goes for broke in his (what I take to be jive) talk to please her:

Set knew his sister all right and Moses began to talk to her the way the Osirians talked to her in their rites. He told her how much he loved her and that he would die for her. Cut his throat swim in a river of thrashing crocodiles fight lions for her pussy. He said that he would cuss the day he was born if he couldn't have it and that he would walk all over Egypt crying like a baby. He said that he would gouge out his eyes and dust off the feet of all the dock workers in Egypt, jump off a cliff and lock himself in a cave for the rest of his life. And every time Moses would say another lie Isis would moan and sigh and whimper and purr like a kitten as Moses' hand moved down and touched her Seal. He fished her temple good. She showed him all her



rooms. And led him into the depths. Of her deathless snake. He fought that part of her until it was limp on the ground. He got good into her Book tongued her ever passage thumbing her leaf and rubbing his hands all over her binding.

(*Mumbo Jumbo* 182)

Given the import of perspective and aspect to the spiritualist argument here, one might read Reed's rendering of Moses' talk (apparently, a kind of internal monologue) as *either* borderline obscene or creatively sexy—for joyfully embodied JGCs—but what matters most in spiritual terms at this juncture, or more than the "aspect" of the vernacular talk, is Moses' subsequent self-interested exploitation of Isis's "gifts" in order to gain power in Egypt. And when the people rise up and he is unable to calm them, he does not lie down in the Tabernacle doorway like Hurston's Moses; rather, Reed writes:

Then the idea hit him. Moses ran into his apartment and removed a leaf from the Book Isis had given him. He returned to the balcony where below the crowds had taken trees and were now using them to pound on the Palace gate. Moses uttered The Work aloud. 1<sup>st</sup> there was silence. Then the people turned toward the Nile and they saw a huge mushroom cloud arise.

A few minutes later, screaming of the most terrible kind came from that direction. The crowd dispersed, trampling 1 another as they rushed for the shelter of their homes. This was a turning point in the Book's history.

. . . . Moses' explosion made even Set's magicians look small. The next day fish and other river creatures dead and dying washed up on the shores of the Nile.

(*Mumbo Jumbo* 186)

Moses' legacy, for Reed—regardless of moral or aesthetic pieties—represents an abusive misreading of the "book" that is on the violent scale of a nuclear bomb. Reed's good reading of Hurston's *Moses*, then, reiterates and *extends* her still comically rendered *distrust* of that "rod of power."

# # #

By way of conclusion, I want to reiterate that if readers begin with Hurston's experiential and anthropological knowledge of storytelling—or, better, the tall tale or "lie"—we will approach her *Moses* with the pre-text that the ambiguity of her "Author's Introduction" rhetorically announces notoriously "double voiced" and multi-perspectival signifying. We will hence be alert to test her initial promise to offer original, sacred African-derived truth and forms of power against the dramatic features of the novel proper, and indeed—as Reed will clarify—her *Moses* emerges as a comical joke-tale<sup>31</sup> combining unreliable testimony and narration with structural irony such that it mitigates *against* readers' experiences of an exoticized black folk culture even as it discursively *conjures* the desire for this pleasure. And yet we are also hence primed to learn something serious about the cultural stakes and responsibilities of spiritual imagination and practice (surely a high bar in the case of an ideational contest between monotheism and polytheism!). One humor scholar has characterized the reading of tall tales thus: "Alert members of the audience are never 'sold' by the teller's exaggerations, but neither are they purely cynical. Their response places

them in a rhetorical middle ground, suspended between knowledge of the tale's falsehood and appreciation for the teller's dexterity in stretching the limits of plausibility."<sup>32</sup> I have been arguing, then, that—with great good humor—Hurston invents the kind of tall tale that “talks up” and then “shortens” a larger-than-life icon that readers might otherwise consume readily but irresponsibly. Yet the novel does not simply dismiss or defer concerns about the sacred; rather, it dramatizes heteroglossic competition for cognitive and cultural authority among a series of good “talkers”—or *potentially* sacralizing culture heroes—in a shape-shifting rhetorical and cosmic world that we must *go to* (multi-contextually) in order to interpret soundly. And in my view these figures cumulatively underscore Hurston's own brand of “sympathetic” language-based, comical “conjure” which invites sharp readers to cultivate critical, ideologically alert attention to representations of black culture.

Indeed, the noisy, argumentative world of Hurston's *Moses* calls for discursive and rhetorical mastery that would *replace* the naïve and impotent awe of larger-than-life magical and charismatic culture heroes with (Reed's own) pragmatic, skeptical, historically informed stance toward the already signifying play of racial language and representation. Especially in the face the many syncretic “tricks” and turns of mythic and legendary history, the anthropologist in Hurston seems to warn caution and discretion rather than instant faith. Thus, we can say that in her very choice to be unclear via humor, comedy, and irony, Hurston hides the specific sacred secrets of an historically commodified people even as she signals—again, to intrepid, non-dogmatic readers like Reed who would *go*—the cognitive and spiritual potential for blending African and African American culture heroes to meet emergent historical and representational challenges. In fact, even if we take Hurston at her word that an Africanist Moses is to be associated with the highest Haitian god Damballah—and respect the ritual integrity of this tradition—it would be inappropriate to seek his *divine presence* in the mundane, *secular* representational world of a novel. Hurston writes in *Tell My Horse*:

There is in Voodoo worship a reverent remoteness where Damballah is concerned. There are not the numerous personal anecdotes about him as about some of the lesser and more familiar gods. I asked why they did not ask more things of him, and I was told that when they make “services” to the other gods they are making them to Damballah indirectly for none of the others can do anything unless he gives them the power. There is the feeling of awe. One approaches the lesser gods and they in turn approach the great one. (120)

If many readers, then, have found that entrenched American racialized comic norms seem met in *Moses*, Reed's turn toward Hurston's research in Vodun, and then his own even more comical “re-reading” of monotheism in *Mumbo Jumbo*, indicate that obfuscating linguistic “conjure” functions felicitously in *Moses*, and this rhetorical “magic” promises to “cure” a corrupted author-reader relationship in its very own comical terms—while it has its cake, too, in pointing out the *way* toward spiritual insight.

Finally, my comments here are not so much intended to be brand new as they are to call us to follow the implied reader Ishmael Reed to acknowledge and articulate more of Hurston's felicitous work before others claim less. Of course if we do not know how to read irony, humor, and the comic in tandem (e.g., when tall hyperbole ironizes a comic and/or stable image), we will not locate a conceptual path for *getting* to the sacred and political

play of ideas in a rich cultural conversation about Moses such as that among Hurston, Reed, and hypothetical readers. Indeed, the interpretive ambivalence—or slow critical vigilance—that has met Hurston’s ambitious third novel has, at least in my view, allowed egregious mis-readings even into contemporary criticism. Mark Christian Thompson, for one, argues in *Black Fascisms* (2007) that Hurston’s *Moses* represents a “black literary fascist text” that privileges “effect over coherent, accessible meaning” and whose images “attempt to perform the same tasks as those in the fascist aesthetics of Pound and Lewis, and in Reifenstahl’s propaganda films”: that is, “to cause the reader to invest libinally in the figure of the Fuhrer without presenting its aims as such.” Thompson continues:

This sexual, often homosexual, investment in the embodiment of fascist rule is effected by the image’s lack of stable content. As a fascist aesthetics, the “open architecture” of the image-laden black fascist text instigates a process in the reader whereby she may insert herself in the text not merely as a participant in a fantasy but as a . . . subject that is completed by a textually induced delusion.<sup>33</sup>

Except, I am arguing, Hurston’s text signifies in a comical and humorous vernacular idiom whose play of ambiguity, incongruity, and possibility are fundamentally incompatible with such stable forms of identity and power.<sup>34</sup>

And yet if this claim that *Moses* supports a black fascist state led by a “Fuhrer” like Moses is not troubling enough, another scholar has argued even more recently that in *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed misappropriates Hurston’s astute *cultural* anthropology of New World versions of the Moses myth and other sacred icons to essentialize the story as an explicitly blood- or race-based religious preserve. Christopher Douglas writes in *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (2009): “Reed frames Hurston not just in terms of cultural nationalism, but also by the suggestion that culture should be hereditary” (34). Further, he asserts that in *Mumbo Jumbo*: “To have a religion is to have a certain set of cultural practices and values but Reed’s ‘ancient religion’ proposes a pre-existing connection to a group of people who lived long ago, a connection that is racial” (269).<sup>35</sup> Again, in my view, “a connection that is racial” is not necessarily problematic; or are we to believe that a “racial” designation such as “African American literature” is evil? In fact, there has been a critical consensus for over a generation that Reed was one of the earliest, most articulate critics of race-based essentialism as it was emergent and prominent in the Black Arts Movement. Moreover, while Reed’s African Americans in *Mumbo Jumbo* are surely its “natural” Jes Grew carriers—and, he writes, “some say” that PaPa LaBas is a descendant of African priests (23)—we cannot overlook the broad multicultural research at the foundation of *Mumbo Jumbo*’s aesthetic and ideological affinity with *Moses* or, more precisely, the epiphanies Reed gains from Hurston’s work to privilege the many creative dynamics of culture over pieties of rigid “race” in the practice of “traditional” religion and spirituality. Indeed, the call that Reed represents to good readers is nicely stated by Black Herman after he is better able than LaBas to make a Petro loa leave the Erzulie-possessed Earline; this “Black American man”—hence *unlikely* adept, according to Earline—explains:

Well it’s like this, PaPa. You always go around speaking as if you were a charlatan and putting yourself down when you are 1 of the most technical dudes with The Work . . . . You ought to relax. That’s our genius here in America. We were dumped

here on our own without the Book to tell us who the loas are, what we call spirits were. We made up our own . . . [and] I think we've done all right. The Blues, Ragtime, The Work that we do is just as good. I'll bet later on in the 50s and 60s and 70s we will have some artists and creators who will teach Africa and South America some new twists. It's already happening. What it boils down to, LaBas, is intent. If your heart's there, man, that's ½ the thing about The Work. Even the European Occultists say that. Doing The Work is not like taking inventory. Improvise some. Open up, Papa. Stretch on out with It. (130)

Cultural syncretism, like any signifying, will always involve a "hall of mirrors" of nuanced improvisational play upon traditional patterning; the devil will be in the details.

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in the introductory note, the essays gathered in this special issue represent some of the wonderful work presented at the September 2012 conference "Watching God and Reading Hurston," hosted by Cleveland State University to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of Zora Neale Hurston's masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The conference was organized in part to bring awareness to some of Hurston's other, lesser-known contributions, so discussion also turned to the important labor necessary for the recovery of her unfortunately forgotten works. Now, two years after the conference, we can mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Hurston's third novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and I examine this novel here since many readers have not yet recognized either its sophisticated, cautious meditation on syncretism in Africanist religions and spirituality or its initial recovery, taken up robustly by Ishmael Reed in his fiction and research during the early 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> See, especially, Chapter 2 of Baker's *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Recall, for example, one of the most famous and troubling under-readings of what most critics now agree is Hurston's masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Richard Wright's 1937 comment that "her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought." Lesser known is his rationale for the hyperbolic dismissal: "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears." Qtd. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 16.

<sup>4</sup> See Mary Helen Washington's recapitulation of the beginning of these critical debates in the foreword to the re-publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) vii-xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Hurston writes in the introduction to her folklore collection *Mules and Men* (1935; New York: Harper and Row, 1990) 2-3:

[T]he Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is Particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries."

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Hedin took it as given that, during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, to a significant extent "the very survival of black [American] stories depend[ed] on their central voices not quite being heard accurately or their central characters not quite being seen for what they were to their authors." See Hedin's now classic essay, published soon after the 1980s height of critical attention to the slave narrative, "Probable Readers, Possible Stories: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Black Narrative," *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 181.

<sup>7</sup> There is only one scholar who, until recently, considered the linguistic and/or rhetorical influence that Hurston had on Reed's later work. In "Generating the Vocabulary of Hoodoo: Zora Neale Hurston and Ishmael Reed," *Zora Neale Hurston Forum* 2.1 (1987): 27-34, James R. Lindroth presents a strong case for the claim that Reed derives his "neo hoodoo" lexicon directly from Hurston's oeuvre, and I want to add to this insight that Reed develops a rhetorical strategy, more generally, that nicely combines serious sacred questions with entertaining, diversionary comic forms and verbal or dialogic entertainment from Hurston's example. Lindroth writes: "[I]t is not merely the Haitian focus of *Mumbo Jumbo* which shows Hurston's influence; rather it is the vocabulary of Hoodoo, deriving from Hurston's and pervading Reed's novels and poetry, which reveals Hurston as an energizing center of Reed's own powerful imagination" (27).

<sup>8</sup> The following two articles, published quite recently, focus centrally on Hurston's oblique signifying critique of the myth of Moses: Rachel Farebrother's "Moses and Nation-Building: Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and Edward Said's *Freud and the Non-European*," *Comparative American Studies* 5.3 (2007): 333-356; and Erica R. Edwards' "Moses, Monster of the Mountain: Gendered Violence in Black Leadership's Gothic Tale," *Callaloo* 31.4 (2008): 1084-1102. But Joshua Pederson's very recent "Letting Moses Go: Hurston and Reed, Disowning Exodus," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 58.3 (Fall 2012): 439-461, is the only contemporary article that centralizes signifying in both Hurston and Reed and examines their critical treatments of the Exodus myth in tandem.

<sup>9</sup> Hurston writes this in a letter to Dr. Edwin Grover of Rollins College, the book's dedicatee [quoted in John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1994) 248]; see Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977) 256. Further, in his introduction to the 1984 re-publication of *Moses*, Blyden Jackson argues the importance of the novel, writing: "Hurston wrote *Moses, Man of the Mountain* during the years when her own life . . . seems to have been most

vibrant and her powers as a creative artist at their peak”; see *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1984) xiv.

<sup>10</sup> “Zora Neale Hurston,” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 998.

<sup>11</sup> It is well known that the figure of Moses and the biblical story of Exodus more generally have held an extraordinarily prominent place in the African American imagination in both religious and political terms, so I will not revisit the history here. But for fascinating consideration of the nation-building efficacy of the myth during the nineteenth century, see Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> I am here of course referencing a classic of narrative theory, Seymour Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, “Foreword: Lines of Descent/Dissenting Lines,” *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) viii, xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Many critics have made this point, but see, for example, Blyden Jackson, “Some Negroes in the Land of Goshen,” *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 19.4 (1953): 104; Darwin Turner, “Zora Neale Hurston: The Wandering Minstrel,” *In a Minor Chord* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971) 111; Ruthe T. Sheffey, “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*: A Fictionalized Manifesto on the Imperatives of Black Leadership,” *CLA Journal* 29 (1985): 217; Paola Boi, “Moses, Man of Power, Man of Knowledge: A ‘Signifying’ Reading of Zora Neale Hurston (Between a Laugh and a Song),” *Women and War: The Changing Status of American Women from the 1930s to the 1950s*, eds. Maria Diedrich and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung (New York: Berg, 1990) 112, 120; Deborah G. Plant, “Politics, Parody, Power, and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*,” *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995) 137; and Robert J. Morris, “Zora Neale Hurston’s Ambitious Enigma: *Moses, Man of the Mountain*,” *CLA Journal* 40 (1997): 306.

<sup>15</sup> This is a common definition of satire, but I take these phrases directly from Steven Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995) 1.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Frank Palmeri’s introduction to *Satire in Narrative: Petronius, Swift, Gibbon, Melville, and Pynchon* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990), 1-18, for discussion of the leveling function of narrative satire.

<sup>17</sup> Darryl Dickson-Carr writes: “*Moses* remains Hurston’s least-studied novel; whereas her 1937 masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has received virtually immeasurable critical attention . . . articles and book chapters on *Moses* remain scarce. The reasons are diverse, but perhaps the most important is that *Moses* is easily the most ambitious work Hurston published in her lifetime. It also fits between the satiric mode, folklore, romance, and the picaresque; it is therefore difficult to classify.” See his *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001) 74 and 78-79.

<sup>18</sup> See Candace D. Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 6.

<sup>19</sup> Gates defines this terminology in the introduction to the landmark, field-defining study, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) xix-xxviii.

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<sup>20</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 123.

<sup>21</sup> As Gates observes, Hurston's *Mules and Men* represents one of the first texts published by an African American author in which signifying is defined, theorized, and also practiced; see *The Signifying Monkey* 97, 193. But for Hurston's own analysis of an African American aesthetic of performance and revision, see her fascinating discussion of originality and imitation in her "Characteristics of Negro Expression," *The Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Continuum, 1996) 27-28.

<sup>22</sup> This is also Gates' usage; see *The Signifying Monkey* 44.

<sup>23</sup> See Johnson's well-known proclamation about the limitations (for readers, because of "long association") of "Negro dialect" in the preface to the first edition of his anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1922) 41. I should also note here that Reed's other two epigraphs to *Mumbo Jumbo* are taken from Johnson's preface: "The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, 'jes' grew"; and "... we appropriated about the last one of the 'jes' grew' songs. It was a song which had been sung for years all through the South. The words were unprintable, but the tune was irresistible and belonged to nobody."

<sup>24</sup> See Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford, 1994) 4, 5, 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Such noise should of course also make us consider whether we are in a trickster's world. And space prevents me from exploring the fascinating topic of Hurston's multiplications of trickster-like figures in her novel, but Moses himself invites a (polytheistic) comparison between himself and the figure of Aaron, who talks and seems to function very much like a classically "trifling," jive-talking Signifying Monkey, in contrast to Moses, when they come into conflict. Hurston writes, after the debacle of the golden calf:

Aaron tried to back off but Moses had him by his whiskers and he wouldn't let him go. So Aaron cringed and fawned and said, "Lord, Moses, you're my bossman, and I know it. I wouldn't think of putting myself on an equal with you. You're a great big high cockadoo and I ain't nothing. So you oughtn't to be wasting your time getting mad with me. You done been around these people long enough to know 'em. You know they ain't nothing and if you and God fool with 'em you won't be nothing neither" (*Moses* 237).

In a violent scene, then, that troubles readers who see Moses as a stabilizing racial hero, near the end of the novel Moses resolves to kill Aaron before Israel enters the promised land and explains—with a provocative vernacular keyword—that Aaron's sons had been killed earlier because "[w]hat they signified had to die if Israel was to be great." For the killing itself, Hurston uses the passive voice to minimize Moses' role as agent and indicates, again provocatively, figurative and possible literal kinship between Moses and Aaron:

The knife descended and Aaron's old limbs crumpled in the dust of the mountain. Moses looked down on him and wept. He remembered so much from way back. "Is this my brother? Is this pitiful old carcass blood of my blood? Maybe this is me myself in other moods" (*Moses* 275).

<sup>26</sup> A relatively recent discussion of Moses' "crossing over," which intriguingly does not consider the centrality of incongruous signifying humor or comedy in Hurston's rhetorical performance here or elsewhere in *Moses*, sees the figure of Moses himself as a reliable, non-ironized model of a kind of self-reflexive "wisdom, self-mastery, and discipline—hence he is constantly 'crossing over'"; see Carolyn M. Jones, "Freedom and Identity in Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*," in *Approaches to Teaching Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. John Lowe (New York: MLA, 2009), 109.

<sup>27</sup> To elaborate, Johnson writes: "Hurston has here calculated a maximum of narrative ambiguity: although every scene that takes place in the royal palace presumes that Moses is the legitimate son of the princess and an Assyrian prince, the dark, oval, object, which Miriam misinterprets, stands as what might be called a floating signifier, a warning against certainty about the Egyptian birth that the rest of the novel takes for granted." See her essay "Moses and Intertextuality: Sigmund Freud, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Bible," in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*, eds. Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1997) 17.

<sup>28</sup> At this narrative juncture, I suggest to my students struggling through the ambiguous discourse of *Moses* to consider how the use dramatic irony along with the comic in this scene, with great signifying indirection, works to rhetorically supplement Hurston's reliance on explicit language to develop and reveal her story. Also helpful here is to introduce the canonical story of the sacred trickster Esu-Elegbara's multi-colored hat, of which two observers have only partial views, and over which these friends fall to fighting in Esu's test of their solidarity. Gates presents this myth in full in *The Signifying Monkey* (32-35), and his interest is to link Esu's characteristics with those of the secular, new world figure of the Signifying Monkey. But because of the informative studies by Hurston and Reed that point toward tricky transformations in the ritual contexts and functions of such culturally related figures, I am more intrigued by their subtle differences.

<sup>29</sup> Reed writes: "Part travelogue, *Tell My Horse* invokes the beauty of Jamaica and Haiti and the sacred zones where African gods continue to dwell—the "good" ones, the Rada group, and the "bad" ones, the Petros. The enemies of Voodoo have exploited rumors associating the Secte Rouge, a Petro sect, with human sacrifice in order to defame Voodoo, less a religion than the common language of slaves from different African tribes, thrown together in the Americas for commercial reasons. This common language was feared because it not only united the Africans but also made it easier for them to forge alliances with those Native Americans whose customs were similar." See his "Foreword," *Tell My Horse* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) xii-xiii.

<sup>30</sup> This is surely a fair, if daunting charge, given the bibliography of 104 books at the end of *Mumbo Jumbo*. And I should note that my students find this list—which presents an alternative, tendentiously critical, view of western history—to serve as a strong foundation for learning West African cosmology.

<sup>31</sup> I borrow this term from Arthur Asa Berger; see his "Glossary of the Techniques of Humor: Morphology of the Joke-Tale," in *Anatomy of Humor* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993) 15.

<sup>32</sup> The topic of Hurston's uses of the tall tale is another fascinating direction for research and interpretation, but for general discussion of the genre, See Henry B. Wonham's study



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"In the Name of Wonder: The Emergence of Tall Narrative in American Writing," *American Quarterly* 41 (June 1989) 288.

<sup>33</sup> See Mark Christian Thompson's *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture between the Wars* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2007) 41.

<sup>34</sup> If readers are still uncomfortable with the prospect that Hurston would be *critical* of and signify on the totalitarian tendencies of charismatic, phallogentric leaders like Moses, even if they are iconographic heroes in the African American imagination, I would direct them to Hurston's 1945 letter to Carl Van Vechten in which she ponders a follow-up story in the planning stages:

But the story I am burning to write is one that will be highly controversial. I want to write the story of the 3000 years struggle of the Jewish people for democracy and the rights of man. You know, Carl, the Christian world reads the Bible with their prejudices, and not with their eyes . . . [so] nobody seems to consider that the Hebrews did not value those laws, nor did they ask for that new religion that Moses forced on them by terror and death. Moses was responsible for the actual death of at least a half million of the people in his efforts to force his laws upon them . . . It is all too evident that Moses did not care a fig for those Hebrew people. Moses had worked out an idea for a theocratic government, and the Hebrews were just so the available laboratory material." See *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002) 529.

<sup>35</sup> See Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009).

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